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## INTRODUCTION

*John Carlin*

Author: Ryan, 76743

Farmers carry out a conservation program that has contributed to soil fertility and stability, lessened wasteful uses of natural resources, and promoted conservation of farmland, woodland and wildlife.

Since 1936, the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), has stressed one core purpose: To establish good soil and water conservation. However, over its almost 45-year course the emphasis of ACP has changed more than once.

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In the early days,  
emphasis was on financial  
remuneration to farmers.  
In the 1930's and early 1940's,  
farmers were desperate  
because of consecutive  
dry years and low prices.  
Many prime farm areas  
were eroding into dust bowls.

But as the program aged, it  
focused less on income to  
farmers and more on keeping  
soil in place and conserving  
the water supply.

Wayne D. Rasmussen,  
historian of the U.S. Department  
of Agriculture, sees five  
historical divisions, or periods,  
in ACP. (See history on page  
\_\_\_\_.)

Most recently the program  
has stressed cleaning up  
rural water, because the Nation  
has grown increasingly aware  
of environmental problems.







Water conservation and quality practices accounted for around 40 percent of 1980 funds, compared to less than 10 percent in 1940. This shows the evolutionary side of the program.

Because Congress appropriates ACP funds yearly, practices have tended to closely reflect what the Nation views as good conservation practices at the time.

Despite changes in focus, several unchanging factors have allowed the program to maintain integrity and purpose over four and one-half decades. The most important of these factors: Farmers have always controlled ACP at the local level and administered the program.

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Secondly, even though many of the practices carried out over the years were not part of a long-term conservation plan, farmers have maintained them, and the practice benefits are still being received.

#### CONSERVATION ENDURES

Statistics and historical breakdowns, helpful as they are, do not tell the ACP story, because ACP is as varied as the Nation itself. Any single story would miss the point. Pages\_\_ to\_\_ contain 16 features that relate the experiences of farmers with the program over the years.

To Willie Shirley, an 80-year-old Navajo stockman who joined the program in 1941, it first meant water for his cattle. Later, it meant defying recent Navajo tradition and returning to an older one--learning what is useful from other cultures.



To Senek Newman, who came to the United States after imprisonment in one of the German concentration camps, it also meant water. His farm, one of the few remaining in Rhode Island, has an ACP pond that helps preserve Canada geese, waters his chickens, and provides water for the fire department during dry spells.

State and county employees of ASCS gathered the farmer memories in this book. In some instances, county employees wrote the stories themselves. All the farmers, except Thomas Echols, were interviewed. In Echols' case, the county executive director interviewed his brother and daughter.

To put the ACP story in perspective, farmers must tell it themselves.



## A SHORT HISTORY OF ACP

Since 1936, committees of farmers elected by neighboring farmers have exercised judgmental and financial control over the Agricultural Conservation Program. These three-member boards, "ASC County Committees," serve in the more than 3,000 rural U.S. counties.

Judgment has been the most valuable contribution of farmer committees. Fair distribution of available funds to solve a county's most pressing conservation problems is at best a difficult job; however, farmers in a county know what the problems are because they are closest to them.





Authority to back up judgment has always rested in the hands of farmer committees, because they control money assigned at the local level. Committees review every request for a cost-share. Committees also have a reputation for stretching funds.

"I enjoy the challenges of ASCS, like making the money go far," said L.E. Cobb, 40, a committee member from Warsaw, Missouri. "We always need more money, especially in the conservation program, and we always need to do more explaining."

Cobb expressed why Congress has supported the committee system since 1936. It is much easier to have a neighbor-- and a neighbor whom questioners have elected themselves-- explain cost-shares in a county.



Although laws specify that committees may authorize 60 to 70 percent in cost-share for some practices, most cost-share payments have recently fallen to between 40 and 50 percent.

"Sometimes I wonder why I serve on the county committee," said Billy Ricks, 53, of Holiday, Missouri, "but somebody needs to do it. The job is rewarding when I see where the federal money goes to help farmers. "

Ricks has farmed since 1948 and has given his time and effort to the Monroe County ASC Committee for 23 years.

--ACP has always sought to demonstrate the need for conservation to farmers, and has started many farmers on the road to a good conservation program on their farms.



--New conservation concepts have often been introduced through ACP. Two feature articles in this book illustrate this. Conservation tillage in Illinois is one example.

This practice now has wide acceptance, but back in 1967 it was untried and unknown to most farmers.

In 1967, conservation tillage was solely a conservation practice that prevented water and wind erosion. It gained acceptance starting on 500 cost-shared acres in Woodford County, Illinois. Today, farmers use this practice not only to save topsoil, but also to cut down on gasoline and oil use.

Manure storage systems prevent animal wastes from entering streams, but at the start of the 1970's they were untried on most farms.





Robert Menn of Monroe County, Wisconsin, installed one of the first such systems in the Nation during 1971 with an ACP cost-share.

Starting in 1952, Menn took a gully-ridden parcel of land and turned it into a productive farm. By 1971, he was not just conservation-minded, he was a conservation leader. "I realized that in our intensively-farmed area, someone had to take the lead in cleaning up the river," is the way Menn put it.

Introduction of new concepts, demonstration of the good conservation can do, and the judgment and authority of farmers elected by neighbors --ACP has shown these traits since 1936. Also, the program can be viewed through five stages of changing focus.

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## FIVE CENTERS OF FOCUS

"When you evaluate ACP," said Wayne Rasmussen, USDA historian, "you must avoid viewing the many goals other than conservation that have been inserted into the program. For example, ACP was linked to price support during the program's first two years."

ACP cost-shares for conservation in 1936 totaled over \$60 million, but over \$374 million was administered through the program mechanism for conservation and income supplements.

## DROUGHT--1936-38. Period 1

"Some farmers and farm wives said that God was punishing the Nation with drought for destroying crops--food--when people were hungry," said Gladys L. Baker. Baker, one of four people who interviewed rural people for Secretary Henry Wallace, now works with Rasmussen.



"When we came to Washington, we reported personally to Wallace. He was impressed by the Biblical aspect. He suggested that I stay around and tell the program and information employees about the feelings of the people," said Baker.

The drought, the worst ever recorded in the United States, embraced over 75 percent of the Nation and severely affected 27 states.

On May 11, 1934, dust storms began in the Great Plains, which became known as "The Dust Bowl." When the wind came, the dry land often just blew away.

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On January 6, 1936, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 unconstitutional. The court basically said that direct payments to farmers for not planting crops were illegal.

The Creation of ACP

On February 29, 1936, the Congress passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act. USDA and farm leaders, convinced of the need to shore up farm prices and farm income, determined that these objectives could be met by inducing farmers through payments to practice conservation.

Philip M. Glick summed up the new concept in the August 1938 Journal of Farm Economics:

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In the original programs, production control was the central objective, with soil conservation and good farm management as incidental goods which were to be sought to be achieved as far as possible. In the agricultural conservation programs soil conservation and good farm management were the central objectives, while a limited amount of production control could not infrequently be developed as a natural by-product.  
(p. 628)

Farmers were paid to change from soil depleting crops, such as corn, cotton, wheat, and tobacco, to soil-building crops, such as soybeans, grass, hay, peas, and beans. ACP and the Farm Income Program were under one law.

"People frequently quoted the Bible in those days," said Gladys Baker. "The idea of conserving the fertility in the land seemed quite different to them than plowing up crops and killing little pigs."

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Gladys Baker noted that by the end of 1936, 1,194 counties in 25 states had been designated drought areas. The ACP was modified in those areas to encourage farmers to increase production. The drop in farm production due to drought obscured the fact that areas planted to major crops increased despite ACP.

When normal weather returned in 1937, crop surpluses and declining prices focused attention on the failure of conservation programs to reduce crop output.

ACP would eventually lead to the idea that more crops could be produced on less land, provided that land was used in the best manner.

Another feature of the 1936 law: The states were encouraged to submit conservation plans, and after that, individual states would become responsible for farm conservation within their borders. Between



1936 and 1962, only one state submitted a conservation plan.

ACP DETACHED --1938-41. Period 2.

On February 16, 1938, the Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act. It reenacted the 1936 law, but with a new feature--The Ever Normal Granary, which hearkened back to Joseph in Egypt in Genesis.

Conservation had a place in the Ever Normal Granary. As Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace put it in March 1937: "I call this part of the ever normal granary program 'storing grain in the soil' instead of 'storing it in the bin.'"

The law distinguished price support loans and payments and the conservation program.

The law was administered by local farmer committees, who were elected.





The idea, banking fertility in the land, gained deeper hold; however, more doubt arose over the concept that soil conservation would or could bring about production adjustment.

Foster F. Elliot of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, today ASCS, wrote in the February 1937 issue of the Journal of Farm Economics:

"...it is probable that the longer we practice soil conservation, the less effective it will become as a means of reducing surpluses."

#### WAR AND RECOVERY--1941-47. Period 3

From 1936 to 1941, the Nation's farmers stored fertility in the land, much as an individual would put money in the bank. During the crisis of World War II and the subsequent worldwide shortage of food, the United States drew on its account.



The cost-share program authorized many practices-- which increased production. Administrators viewed the authorization of these practices as necessary to fight the war and feed the world. Subsequent administrators have viewed these wartime measures as unnecessary to achieve conservation.

#### GROWTH OF TECHNICAL PLANNING--1947-60--Period 4

Although Secretary Wallace had decided to have ACP and the programs of the Soil Conservation Service administered separately, he and succeeding Secretaries of Agriculture viewed the divergence of conservation points of view with growing concern.

It was never denied that cost-shares started farmers toward conservation and speeded conservation work nationwide, but SCS favored long-term, whole-farm conservation efforts.



Farmer-elected committee-members of ASCS and members of soil conservation boards were often neighbors, and sometimes they were the same individuals, but committees and boards used different methods to achieve conservation. Committees stressed that they reached farmers quickly with conservation help. They also stressed that a single practice on a farm that had no conservation often encouraged the farmer to become interested in soil and water conservation.

SCS stressed the efficiency of soil surveys, on-site inspections and the conservation plans that set conservation priorities for a farm.

#### The Whitten Amendment

In 1950, Congressman Jamie L. Whitten (Miss.) inserted into ACP's appropriation an amendment under which county committees could transfer up to 5 percent of ACP funds to SCS for technical assistance.



In 1951, Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan issued memorandum 1278, which set procedures under which SCS and ASCS should work together with ACP.

The elected farmers on committees retained their functions--advisement and financial control.

SCS received an advisory role in developing state, county, and farm plans. SCS was also given responsibility for technical aspects for ACP practices, except those that concerned forestry. The U.S. Forest Service handles the technical aspects of forestry conservation and tree planting for ACP in most states.

The ACPS

From 1953 to 1961, ACP became an independent agency, the Agricultural Conservation Program Service. Paul M. Koger, presently Assistant Commissioner





of Agriculture for Tennessee,  
served as ACPS's last administrator.

"I first came to Washington as  
the Southeast Area Director for  
CSS (now ASCS), said Koger,  
"And I became ACPS Administrator  
in January 1956.

"Back then, farmers did not feel  
they could get conservation done  
unless the government shared  
part of the cost. Cost-sharing  
was a necessary incentive, and  
there was a lot of conservation  
work done on the land that never  
would have been done without  
the ACP incentive.

"We placed a lot of emphasis  
on soil erosion. The program  
got into terracing and permanent  
pasture. In certain areas there  
was emphasis on water conserva-  
tion, mostly in the West."

TOWARD ENDURING  
CONSERVATION--1961-Present.  
Phase 5.

Several actions in mid-1961  
give ACP its present focus, which  
has sharpened, on enduring con-



servation practices and on water conservation over the past two decades.

On June 5, Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman changed the title of the Commodity Stabilization Service to the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, and ACPS became part of the new agency.

On August 8, the Agricultural Act of 1961 was approved, and the new law had some deep effects on the direction of the program. Previous laws had always presumed that the states would one day assume control of the program.

"There were really no takers on this," said Wayne Rasmussen. "The states wanted the conservation function financed and administered by the federal government." After this law, ACP remained a permanent federal program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



In table 1, from 1961 to 1981, the "Total assistance of ACP" and "ACP cost-shares" columns reflects the amounts paid to the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service for technical assistance. The data reflects the fact that farm income supplement is not part of ACP and that technical assistance is a fixed cost of any conservation program.

The program pays to put conservation on the land; however, the focus of how the government should help farmers has changed.

In the last decade, the language that the Congress has used to state ACP's annual appropriation show two trends. First, the Congress wants the ASC county committees to retain authority over the program. Second, the Congress wants part of the funding used to clean up streams and rivers.





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